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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEGUCIGALPA 001655

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USSOUTHCOM FOR GEN HILL
STATE FOR PM, INR, AND INL/LP
STATE FOR WHA AND WHA/CEN

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SUBJECT: FURTHERING REGIONAL INTEGRATION; GENERAL HILL
DISCUSSES SOUTHCOM INITIATIVES AND OTHER ISSUES WITH GOH

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 1518

Classified By: Ambassador Larry L. Palmer;
Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (U) Summary: On July 15, General Hill, USSOUTHCOM Commander, met with Honduran Minister of Defense, Federico Breve, and separately, with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), General Jose Isaias Barahona to discuss Central American integration, narcotrafficking, U.S. military assistance, and other issues of importance. General Hill also paid a courtesy call on President Ricardo Maduro on July 14. The Government of Honduras (GOH) remains receptive to SOUTHCOM initiatives, although limited resources and political concerns remain stumbling-blocks as Honduras continues to focus its armed forces on addressing pressing regional concerns. End Summary.

Regional Integration and Possible "Plan Centro America"

2. (C) MOD Breve told General Hill he was generally pleased with the direction and pace of regional integration and the path the Conferencia De Fuerzas Armadas (CFAC) was taking. He noted that Central American presidents were engaged on regional military issues, and that CFAC was focusing its efforts on trans-national threats such as combating terrorism, narcotrafficking, and organized crime in general. Breve also indicated CFAC was in the initial process of considering a comprehensive regional plan to further address these problems, but noted that budgetary constraints were a real problem, suggesting Honduras alone needed some USD 40-50 million to "guarantee" better results. Breve did express some consternation that El Salvador and Guatemala, despite an agreement in 2002 to do so, had yet to submit comprehensive arms inventories to the Secretaria de Integracion Centroamericana (SICA).

3. (C) General Hill recommended CFAC follow the example of Colombia by developing a comprehensive, regionally integrated plan and then in a unified manner approach the U.S. for funding. General Hill pointed out that individually it could be difficult to garner political support in Washington for military assistance funding increases; jointly, however, the Central American countries had a much better chance of success. He also noted, considering upcoming U.S. elections in November, that realistically, no action would be taken in Washington until next year, allowing CFAC sufficient time to develop a sound action plan. General Hill indicated to Breve that if CFAC were to do this, DOD and DOS would likely both be supportive of the effort.

Next Steps on RTI

4. (C) General Hill queried MOD Breve and CJCS Barahona on their latest thinking regarding SOUTHCOM's proposed Regional Training Initiative (RTI), while at the same time elaborating in more detail where he saw RTI heading. General Hill assured Breve and Barahona that the U.S. understands the RTI process will take time to evolve but that it presents Honduras with an opportunity to show regional leadership while also providing a venue the Central American states can use to better regionally integrate. General Hill also told Breve and Barahona that the U.S. does not envision a single facility with an RTI sign posted above it, but rather that the philosophical concept be embraced by the GOH who could then, with U.S. assistance, seek other Central American participation, including exercises in those countries.

5. (C) MOD Breve stated agreement with RTI in principle and again confirmed Honduras' willingness to participate. However, he did say that other countries would also have to agree to host exercises on their bases. He did not claim, as had been indicated previously, that Honduras' participation in RTI would require National Congress approval but, he did allude to the political "scene" as currently not being "ideal" to advance such an initiative.

¶6. (C) General Hill suggested as a next step that within six months, SOUTHCOM would generate an exercise concept involving Honduras and a number of other Central American countries to be held at Soto Cano and a separate location within another participant's country. General Hill envisioned this initial training exercise would be held at the platoon or company level. Breve agreed in concept and said he looked forward to what SOUTHCOM would propose.

Hondurans in Haiti?

¶7. (C) General Hill raised the issue of Honduran participation in peacekeeping operations (PKO) in Haiti with both MOD Breve and CJCS Barahona. He indicated he would shortly be sending Honduras, and the other CFAC members, a letter suggesting they form a PKO battalion (one company from each of the four countries) that could possibly deploy to Haiti. He underscored the U.S. Government's understanding that, if accepted, it would take time to organize. Breve was open to the idea in theory, but told General Hill that many details would require attention before CFAC could deploy to Haiti, including a decision on who would command the expedition.

¶8. (C) CJCS Barahona stated the Honduran military is ready/able to deploy to Haiti, but the decision to participate is a political decision and the issue is a sensitive one. (Comment: Honduran national primary elections are scheduled for February next year and public opinion, although hardly fully informed, has been squarely against any type of deployment to Haiti. The GOH might still be willing to support the UN mission there, but they are not pushing it. One thing the GOH mentioned in the past (and something that would help give them political cover) is their desire to receive a formal invitation from the UN to provide PKO forces to Haiti. End Comment).

Honduras' No Shoot-Down Policy

¶9. (C) General Hill stressed to both MOD Breve and CJCS Barahona the utmost importance that Honduras strictly follow its declared no shoot-down policy. Breve and Barahona assured General Hill they fully understood U.S. legal requirements regarding CNIES information sharing and they again reiterated Honduras' "no shoot-down" policy. MOD Breve, however, echoed President Ricardo Maduro's earlier frustration with U.S. policy, particularly the U.S.'s expectations that Honduras scramble air intercepts simply to escort intruding aircraft through Honduran air space. General Hill told Breve that the U.S. was working on a regional air-bridge denial strategy that addresses these issues but the policy making process was still not complete.

Honduran Ordnance Destruction

¶10. (C) On July 6, a SOUTHCOM Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team arrived in Honduras for a three day mission in response to a Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF) request that the U.S. assist them with limited ordnance destruction. The team's primary mission was to assess the types and quantities of ordnance, particularly the air-launched munitions that Honduras currently holds, and to explore disposal options. (Note: It was initially thought that Honduras might be willing to significantly reduce its stockpiles of air-launched munitions, particularly those capable of being delivered by Honduras' aging fleet of F-5s. It appears, however, that the GOH is seeking U.S. assistance for only destroying obsolete and/or dangerous ordnance that poses a health and safety risk to HOAF personnel. As the EOD team's initial report concludes: "The problem is that the vast majority of ordnance in their destruction plan is not air-launched ordnance." End Note).

¶11. (C) General Hill urged CJCS Barahona to consider selecting more air-launched ordnance for destruction. He did, however, assure Barahona that the U.S. would be willing to assist the HOAF with general ordnance destruction. (Comment: The current state of some of the HOAF's munitions stockpiles poses a serious health and environmental risk. The HOAF is aware of this and is seeking U.S. assistance in its destruction. It does not appear, however, that the HOAF is considering even marginally reducing its serviceable air-launched munitions. In this light, Honduran ordnance destruction should not be considered in any way a quid-pro-quo for Nicaraguan MANPADS destruction. End Comment).

MINIMIZE CONSIDERED
Pierce